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if delayed then denied

Political Populism:

A wave of the Age





THE TIDAL WAVE OF POPULISM(S): A VIEW FROM AND ON EUROPE

↔ Paul Weller

A Wave of the Age: What is/are Populism(s)?

Alert readers will have noticed that I have adopted the convention of using the potentially plural word ‘populism(s)’ rather than the singular form ‘populism’, recognising that the characteristics of what this article is concerned with are subject to contestation. For a comprehensive review of the key relevant academic literature discussing this, it is hard to do better than refer to 2017 (*The Oxford Handbook of Populism*¹ and the 2019 *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*).²

However, given that even in the distilled forms of these two handbooks the discussion runs to over 34 chapters in the former and 21 in the latter, in an article of this length, it is not possible adequately to explore all its contested meanings. Thus, as a ‘working starting point’ which allows this article to proceed, I am offering the following summary response, returned by Chat GPT to the author following entry of the instruction: “Give a summary, with examples, of what is meant by populism.”³

“Populism refers to a political approach that appeals to the concerns and interests of ordinary people, often

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emphasizing the distinction between the ‘common people’ and the ‘elite’ or establishment. Populist leaders typically present themselves as champions of the people and claim to represent their interests against the perceived corrupt or self-serving elites. While populism can manifest in various forms and ideologies, its defining characteristic is the focus on the general public and its grievances.”

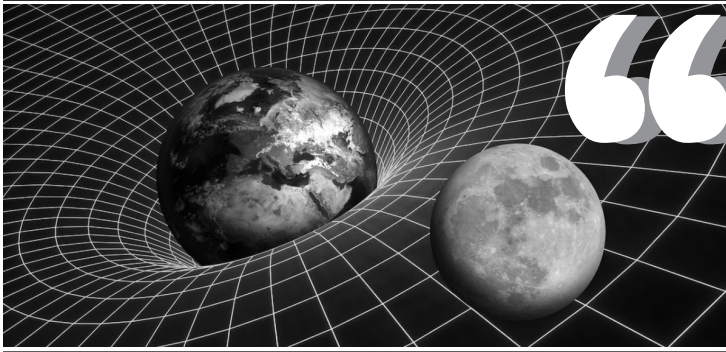
This summary went on to refer to a range of geographically and temporally diverse examples under the sub-headings of “Latin American Populism”; “European Right-Wing Populism”; “Brexit and Populist Sentiment”; and “Donald Trump’s Populist Appeal”, before concluding:

“While populist movements can address genuine grievances and give voice to marginalized groups, they also tend to oversimplify complex issues, stoke division, and rely on charismatic leaders. The manifestations of populism can vary significantly across countries and contexts, but the core idea of championing the interests of the people against perceived elites remains a common thread.”

Although use of Chat GPT raises many issues, not least in the worlds of education and scholarship, I think it is at least arguable that the above provides a credible and digestible set of indicators about the phenomenon/a with which this article deals but from an European perspective as noted.

A Wave of the Age and a Turning of the Tides?

The waves of the earth’s physical



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ocean come in and recede in the context of a combination of gravitational forces around the moon, the sun, and the earth. So if the populism(s) of the age have indeed, as suggested by the title of this edition of *Social Justice*, been a “a wave of the age”, it will also be important also to examine whether, and if so, how far, the gravitational forces of populism(s) might or might not, at least in Europe, be coming to a potential turning point relative to what has more recently seemed to be their inexorable rise.

In relation to this question, it should be noted that I have been writing this article during a temporal conjunction in June 2023 within which three key figures who have been associated with populism(s) in the Western world appear have had reckonings with realities that have at least seriously challenged the worldviews that they have tried to promote.

a) Reckonings with Reality in the US, UK and Italy

These reckonings with reality include the former US President, Donald Trump, and the former European Prime Ministers Boris Johnson of the UK and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy.

While not himself a European, Trump’s brand of politics has had a significant impact on European political life, not least in connection with Boris Johnson, whose support for ‘Brexit’ during the UK’s 2016 referendum campaigns on European Union membership coincided with Trump’s Presidential campaign which itself succeeded in 2017 and which in turn led, on Johnson’s own accession to power in 2019, to him being dubbed by Donald Trump as “Britain Trump”. In June 2023, in addition to other ongoing legal

cases, former President Donald Trump was arraigned on 37 counts by Federal prosecutors, including 31 violations of the Espionage Act, for having wilfully withheld classified documents and obstructing justice. Trump’s reported reaction was to call the charges against him “political persecution”, accusing the current US President Biden of orchestrating the charges and of being “the president who together with a band of his closest thugs, misfits and Marxists tried to destroy American democracy.”⁴

Like Trump after him, Silvio Berlusconi combined business interests and political power in such a way that, especially through the commercial media dominance secured by himself and his family. The form of populism he developed when (following his first short-lived government in 1994) he stormed to power for the so-called ‘Berlusconi decade’ of 2001-2011, prefigured aspects of the populisms later implemented around Trump and Johnson, not least in deployment of their personalities in ways that caused many observers to wonder how such individuals could possibly have come to public office.

Thus, during his political career Berlusconi was remarkably able to survive at least 36 legal charges laid against him ranging from false accounting to bribing judges to various sex-related scandals, until a 2013 fraud conviction resulted barred him from office for six years.

Nevertheless, Berlusconi managed to become Italy’s longest serving post-Second World War Prime Minister, in the process creating an Italian ‘New Right’ from his own Forza Italia in combination with the regionalist

Northern League and the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI, or Italian Social Movement) which rebranded its fascist roots as the ‘post-fascist’ National Alliance. But with his death on 12.6.2023, this ‘comeback kid’ of Italian populism, who had tried to stave off aspects of his increasing age through a facelift and a hair transplant, had his final reckoning with a reality that none can escape, following which he was buried in the mausoleum he built for his and his family’s bodies, in the grounds of his multi-million Euro home in Arcore, near Milan.⁵

In the UK, also, in June 2020, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson resigned his seat in House of Commons ahead of the publication of the Commons’ Privileges Committee report which found him to have been guilty of deliberately misleading Parliament over parties held in Number Ten Downing Street in contravention of the national rules for such gatherings during Covid that were set by him as Prime Minister. Johnson’s response was to claim that had been the victim of “kangaroo court” installed as part of a plot “to take revenge for Brexit and ultimately to reverse the 2016 referendum.”⁶

While Johnson bewails this, in relation to a Brexit project that was rooted in the a very narrow outcome of what, in 2016, was formally only an advisory referendum, as Peter Kellner, the former President of the YouGov polling organisation, put it in the title of a recent article: “Anti-Brexit Britain has reached the point of return”, with the current c. 25% gap between pro and anti-EU poll results being such that Kellner is now able clearly to state that: “Britain is

now an anti-Brexit country.”⁷

b) Some Mixed Pictures in the US and Europe:

While the above three differential encounters with reality might point in the direction of at least some changing in the tides, the overall picture in relation to populist gravitational forces in Europe remains something of a mixed one.

In the deeply polarised world of US politics, Trump has a loyal base of Republican Party supporters who believe that the legal cases against him have been confected to undermine his nomination as a potential Republican Party candidate for the 2024 Presidential Election. While Berlusconi is now dead and, since his 2019 election as a Member of the European Parliament, he became a much-reduced figure in Italian politics, nevertheless aspects of his ‘New Right’ political legacy have lived beyond him through the victory of a conservative alliance that won an outright majority in the October 2022 Italian election that led to the appointment as Prime Minister of Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the right-wing populist Brothers of Italy party.

Considered in terms of the wider Europe, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party still remains in power in Hungary as well as the Law and Justice Party in Poland, while in Finland, the far-right populist Finns Party has become part of a new coalition government. However, in France, in April 2022, Emmanuel Macron had again defeated Marine le Pen of the Rassemblement National (National Rally Party, known until 2018 as the Front National, or National Front).

c) Some Dangerous Developments in Germany:

In addition, I am writing this article out of the context of one who now has a primary residence in Germany following the ongoing personal and familial impact of the Brexit that, in a previous edition of Social Justice, I called “A Colonial Boomerang in a Populist World.”⁸ While the decision to primarily locate to Germany was very much (although not exclusively) to do with my sense of dislocation from a UK which, since the jingoistic furies unleashed by Brexit I now find it hard to recognise or identify with, it is not without significance that the popular wisdom of the English language contains such warnings as “the grass is not always greener on the other side” and “out of the frying pan into the fire”.

In the light of this, it is important to note that, also during the period in which I have been writing this article, the populist *AfD* (or *Alternative für Deutschland*/Alternative for Germany) party – and which has been classified by the German intelligence services as “rightwing extremist” party – has been riding high at levels of between 18-20% in the opinion polls, and showing more support than individually either the German Chancellor’s *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SDP, or German Social Democratic Party) or its ruling coalition partners - *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (or Alliance 90/The Greens) and the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP, or Free Democratic Party) parties.

Furthermore, in the week in which this article was completed, an *AfD* candidate was elected as Germany’s first ever *AfD Landrat* (district administrator, or roughly speaking the

equivalent of a mayor) in the district of Sollingen, in Thuringia. This was on the basis of the support of 52.8% of those voting compared with the 47.2% secured by the previous Christian Democratic Union (CDU) incumbent, a development in relation to which the Central Council of Jews in Germany referred to a “bursting of a dam” in German Post-War politics.⁹

Wedge Issues: Economic Distress and Culture Wars:

It will perhaps have been noted that the Chat GPT summary around ‘populism’ contained no direct reference to either the political ‘Left’ or the political ‘Right’. And indeed, populism(s) can in principle be associated with either of the wings of politics. This is because populism(s) are usually closely connected with times of social crisis within which widespread economic problems lead to profound social distress. In Europe, at least, this tends to be manifest not only when there is an increase of those living on the margins of societies in deep poverty but also when, among those whom German political discourse refers to as *die Mitte* (the Middle or Centre), there is also either a relative worsening of their material circumstances and/or a fear of it.

This then provides fertile ground within which the political diagnoses and cures offered by populism(s) can be propagated. In recent years in Europe the populisms of the political Left have tended to be articulated not in terms of a divide between the working class and the rest, but more in terms of the material interests of a very small number of hyper-rich individuals and a limited number of multinational corporations as conflicting with most people across the working and middle classes.



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Europe's development of such populism(s) is largely achieved through the pursuit of an electoral politics that is informed by highly sophisticated and manipulative social media mechanisms which are able to segment the general population into groups that are statistically predicted to be receptive to particular 'messages'.

By contrast, through the identifying of so-called 'wedge issues', the political Right has had a tendency both to insinuate conspiracy theories and demagogically to stoke 'culture wars' through which anger is then directed at a much broader range 'enemies.' This is done through a process of 'othering' in which cultural/ethnic and/or religious, and/or political 'differences' are instrumentalised against 'insiders', while also being stoked against 'outsiders' from the Two Thirds World who, regardless of their status in law as asylum-seekers or potential migrants, are framed as an undifferentiated mass of 'illegals'.

In contemporary Europe the development such populism(s) is largely achieved through the pursuit of an electoral politics that is informed by highly sophisticated and manipulative social media mechanisms which are able to segment the general population into groups that are statistically predicted to be receptive to particular 'messages.' As neatly expressed by Andrew Hesselden (a communications professional who campaigns for the restoration of the Freedom of Movement UK citizens lost through Brexit) in an electoral politics of a populist kind:

"They persuade people who don't like YOU, to vote for THEM, because YOU don't like THEM. YOU not liking THEM is vital for THEM to be liked by those people. After all, if THEY are YOUR enemies then surely, THEY must be friends of those people. That's populism and is how we fuel it." ¹⁰

It is notable that nothing in the above relates to the 'substance' of material or economic issues but rather is concerned with constructing and manipulating group identities. As succinctly put

by the former press spokesperson of the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Alistair Campbell, such a "performative polarising populism" is a way of focussing on "a problem to be exploited" rather than on a problem as something that is to be politically solved.¹¹

An Ongoing Challenge: Political Visioning and Responsibility

One of the biggest challenges arising from these issues is how to articulate and conduct a form of politics which, on the one hand, recognises that in even previously relatively prosperous and stable societies following what at the end of the Cold War Francis Fukuyama called "the end of history,"¹² and after which there has seemed to be 'no alternative' to the extension of a single global market capitalism with supply chains operating from the cheapest points of extraction and production through to the points at which maximum sales value can be achieved, deep material and economic cleavages have been created which cannot not be ignored.

In the face of such realities, it is arguably of great importance to be able to articulate political visions of a kind that challenge the 'business as usual' approach of a mere technocratic management of what is experienced by so many as a fundamentally unjust economic system. But it also important to be able to find ways of doing this that do not themselves run the risk of falling into alternative populist utopianisms of a kind that, on their first sustained engagement with the ambiguous realities of social, political, and economic life will lead to further disenchantment and cynicism around the political process that could then metamorphosise into even more dangerous developments.

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